

Our Change In Viet: How It Happened

SECRETS IN SAIGON—Intrigue and questionable loyalties have often masked the political phase of the cruel Communist-triggered civil war in South Viet Nam. Controversial regimes have been produced in a coup and counter-coup atmosphere. Official U. S. statements, now optimistic, sometimes bleak, zig and zag with tortuous policy decisions for this country so deeply committed with blood and treasure. The mask was pulled back by Sanche de Gramont to tell the story of how President Diem and his brother really died. Today he reveals another phase that baffled outsiders.

By Sanche de Gramont
Of The Herald Tribune Staff

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SAIGON.

When Defense Secretary Robert S. McNamara and Gen. Maxwell D. Taylor returned to Washington after their September tour of South Viet Nam, they reported publicly that the war against the Viet Cong Communist guerrillas was going so well that all American military advisers might be withdrawn in 1965.

However, it is widely believed here that they gave President Kennedy a far more sober picture of conditions under President Ngo Dinh Diem than they admitted publicly.

It now seems clear from the various ways in which Washington disengaged itself from the Diem regime that M. McNamara and his Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman accepted the most important single fact of the anti-guerrilla war: that it could not be won as long as Mr. Diem remained in power because he no longer had the support of the people.

A special report on the military situation was prepared toward the end of September by a committee including members of the U. S. military mission, the Embassy, the aid mission and the Central Intelligence Agency. The result of intensive study in the field, it revealed deep misgivings about many aspects of the war on the Reds.

The committee's report, contested by high-ranking military men, declared the strategic hamlet program had not been uniformly successful and the Vietnamese Army had overextended itself in the Communist-infested Mekong Delta country.

Ultimately, Washington demonstrated its loss of confidence in the Diem government by holding back funds for Mr. Diem's Special Forces—which had led the Aug. 21 pagoda raids—unless they were deployed against the Communists in the field. Thus, indirectly the U. S. accepted the committee's pessimistic view of the military situation.

The decisive event in destroying U. S. confidence in the Diem regime's ability to win the war, it is thought here, was the Aug. 21 raid on Buddhist pagodas by government troops. The CIA's top man in Saigon, John H. Richardson, reportedly gave Washington no advance warning of the raid, and for several days the United States didn't know who was responsible.

When the Kennedy administration found out, it vainly demanded the ouster, from the government of Ngo Dinh Nhu, the late President's influential brother. Shortly afterward, Henry Cabot Lodge replaced Frederick E. Nolting Jr. as the U. S. Ambassador in Saigon. Not long after that, Mr. Richardson was recalled to Washington for "consultations."

Mr. Lodge was the first high American official to criticize the Diem dynasty openly. His strong rebuttal of Mme. Ngo Dinh Nhu's barbed remark that American mili-

tary men in her country were "little soldiers of fortune" helped to dissociate the U. S. from her brother-in-law's government.

Since the fall of the Diem regime, U. S. military spokesmen here have been under fire for their public optimism in the bad old days. Their story is that officer-corps morale in the Vietnamese Army was at rock bottom and troops were reluctant to come to grips with Viet Cong units.

Two main excuses are given for the earlier rosy view of the war effort. First, American military advisers say it was not their place to criticize the Vietnamese Army publicly.

"This was a Vietnamese affair, and our advisers would have lost the trust of Vietnamese officers if we had become mixed up in it," one American explained. "This was something they had to settle without us."

Secondly, military men the world over are firm in the belief that bad news gives aid and comfort to the enemy. It is second nature for military spokesmen to accentuate the positive.

The latest positive statement from the Vietnamese authorities yesterday claimed small-scale victories over the Viet Cong both north and south of Saigon. The guerrillas reportedly left 10 dead and carried off 60 more dead and wounded after the government repulsed an attack on a fortified outpost 100 miles to the southwest. Government casualties were put at 10 dead. No casualty figures were given for the fight in the north.

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